

Roberta DiMezza

From: Padma Venkatraman <venkatraman.padma@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 19, 2024 12:03 PM
To: House Judiciary Committee
Subject: Testimony From Dr. Padma Venkatraman, RI citizen, regarding Bill # H7575

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Testimony From: Dr. Padma Venkatraman

Bill number: H7575

Viewpoint:

In Support of Librarians' right to indemnification from possible prosecution;
For Right to Free Expression by Writers and Freedom of Readers to Access Books;
Against Censorship

Hearing Scheduled For: 3/21

Chair: Rep. Robert Craven; Vice-chairs: Rep. Carol McEntee, Rep. Jason Knight

Dear Representatives Craven, McEntee, and Knight,

As a parent of a teenager who is a voracious reader, and as the award-winning author of several books for children and teenagers, I am writing in support of librarians and freedom of speech as regards Bill # H7575 (scheduled for a hearing this Thursday 3/21/2024 with the House Judiciary).

As a parent, I absolutely affirm my parental right to teach my child what I believe. But as a citizen of a democracy, I also carry the vital responsibility to teach my child that others, whose beliefs differ, have an equally respected place in our society. Parents and guardians should direct their energies towards engaging in discussions with children and young adults on the role of choice in our world. We have a right to guide our charges toward what we feel is important, but absolutely NOT to remove any and everyone else's access to what we dislike. Our common humanity is under threat of erasure when certain people's stories are targeted, and there are attempts to rewrite history, privilege some aspects of humanity, and actively suppress certain voices.

I am a naturalized citizen – and, second only to my desire to vote – the most cherished right that was granted to me as citizen, what drove me to acquire citizenship and to leap over all the hurdles required to gain this privilege is our nation's commitment to providing and securing, for our its citizens, access to knowledge, and education to understand and evaluate a variety of opinions.

Public libraries vital to this endeavor. They are secular halls that secure our freedom to revel in knowledge and explore a variety of opinions. They have a mission and mandate to provide something vital to the survival of democracy: unlimited access to truth.

If we are to move toward the Utopian ideal of liberty, justice and equality for all, which is what I believe Americans aspire to achieve, we need to be able to imagine a universe in which people of all identities can be heroes. Such a universe is precisely what readers enter, when they have access to diverse books written by and for readers of all ages, beliefs, and backgrounds. Challenges, bans and removals of books conflict directly with this basic American value, and the principles of our libraries and our communities.

We are living in a time of unprecedented censorship. Between January 1 and August 31, 2023, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom reported 695 attempts to censor library materials and services and documented challenges to 1,915 unique titles. Challenges have increased by 20% from the reporting period in 2022. Censorship records are being shattered.

As a female writer of color who is Hindu/Buddhist, and who has a doctorate in the science of oceanography, I am aware of and especially concerned to see that books challenged are predominantly those written by or featuring a protagonist who is person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and, to a lesser-degree, those that tackle scientific subjects or focus on non-Christian religious celebrations (e.g. Ramadan). I had to imagine futures for myself that I never encountered in books; my child should not have to do so. All children should be able to see their cultures and faiths and families celebrated and find heroes they can identify with, in the books they read.

It is alarming to witness the fact that across our nation, librarians and educators have been subjected to persecution, and even criminal prosecution for teaching about and/or providing age-relevant materials about sex, gender or race. Forty-four states across the country already have laws in place that assert an affirmative defense for librarians and educators in their obscenity laws.

Rhode Island remains the only New England state that does not currently have exemptions from prosecution for bona fide professionals including teachers, librarians, and museum educators who are doing their jobs in developing their collections. We need to support such experts as they do the jobs for which they have special training. These educated professionals are on the frontlines of our battle for freedom of speech, in our current climate of censorship, and they are trained to employ clear and standardized processes for selection of materials. The policies they use to develop their collections are already approved by their governing bodies. They need to be able to work without fear that legal action will be taken against them if they provide access to materials that a few people may find objectionable. Furthermore, there are procedures in place, which should be followed, if anyone wishes to document concern or request reconsideration of a specific material.

After decades of struggle by many, including authors of color such as myself, libraries and educational institutions are moving toward – although they have by no means as yet achieved anything resembling – greater equality in terms of representing historically marginalized voices. We need to assist them in curating books that reflect the pluralistic nature of American society. And let me reiterate that we are still FAR from achieving anything on bookshelves that accurately or even closely resembles the diversity of our nation; still less our world.

Finally, there is a financial aspect to this as well. Unfortunately, even today, they are not as well-funded as they ought to be. Libraries, museums, and educational institutions should not have to expend their limited monetary resources defending themselves against possible litigation or potential criminal prosecution for fulfilling their mission. Such threats would force these institutions to redirect precious public funds from purchasing materials and providing services that are vital to communities. Moreover, authors are self-employed individuals. Writers and all artists who selflessly serve society rarely recuperate the financial remuneration their work deserves. Our careers are severely threatened by any and all efforts to bolster censorship. We deserve as much financial consideration as independent owners of small businesses in our state.

Thank you for your time, thought, energy and serious consideration of this matter, and for your service to our state.

With regards,

Padma Venkatraman

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Watch a [PBS](#) interview with Dr. Padma Venkatraman, award-winning author of [THE BRIDGE HOME, BORN BEHIND BARS](#), *Climbing the Stairs*, *Island's End* and *A TIME TO DANCE*; Instructor, Sarah Lawrence College, Writing Institute; WNDB Walter Dean Myers Award Winner, 3-time South Asia Book Award Winner, 2-time Paterson Prize Winner, 2 Nerdies, 2 Julia Ward Howe Book Awards, 2 Malka Penn Honors, Prix des Bibliothèques finalist, 2-time Sakura Medal finalist, Litterato Prize finalist, ALA Notables, Kirkus Best Book, Booklist Editor's Choice etc; [@padmatv](#) (twitter); [@venkatraman.padma](#) (ig, fb, Li).

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